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ABSTRACT

An overview of stress management techniques is offered in this paper. Special focus is on the characteristics, causes, and effects of stress; potential sufferers; six reduction strategies; and stress and the principalship. A conclusion is that stress is real; although complete elimination is unlikely, it can be alleviated through effective reduction techniques requiring individual commitment. (12 references) (LMI)

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Stress Management Techniques for the 1990's

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Stress Management Techniques for the 1990's

Stress is a common hazard for today's busy population. We hear and read of the many harmful aspects of stress. This paper will focus on the many characteristics and effects of stress; what it is, what causes it, how we react differently to it, who is most likely to suffer from it and how to reduce its effects. Most of all, however, this will emphasize that stress is real, it is a daily phenomenon and it can be and often is deadly.

DEFINITION OF STRESS

Sports psychologist Dr. Jim Loehr defined stress as a biomechanical event. When confronted with a stressful situation, the brain signals the body and powerful hormones are released into the bloodstream. The hormones, a host of very powerful agents, activate the central nervous system and activate our biological alarm system. This process immediately sustains blood pressure, increases the body's supply of energy and makes other hormones function more efficiently. At the most basic biological level, our bodies are preparing to confront a life or death situation. Put another way, we are preparing to fight to defend ourselves or to run to escape the danger; it is a survival mechanism designed to trigger the emotions of fear and anger. This type of powerful reaction was very necessary, for example, for a gunfighter and a sheriff as they walked down a dusty street for a gunfight in years past. That same reaction today, on the other hand, is usually very unnecessary.

How one responds to the physical and emotional stimuli of any situation is highly individual. Simply put, one's reaction is determined by one's perception of the situation itself. For example, getting stuck in a traffic jam will cause many different reactions among the people who are experiencing

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the same situation. One person may view the delay as a chance to unwind from the frustrations of a hard day at the office, while someone in the car ahead may literally scream and pound their fists on the steering while at being held up. Whether or not one sees the situation as being a cause for stress and the nature of their reaction depends entirely on that person, not on the situation itself.

SITUATIONS THAT FREQUENTLY CAUSE STRESS

While acknowledging that situations and events themselves do not cause or induce stress, certain situations have been identified as being more likely to be associated with stress. Scientists have identified a spouse's death, divorce and losing one's job as being the top three situations that induce excessive stress in people; specifically, men and women who have lost a spouse die of cancer at a rate as much as twelve times greater than that of other married people after a two year period.

Situations associated with stress vary across the range of occupations and lifestyles of the population. The lists which follow are some examples of events and characteristics which are commonly identified as being irritated frustrating, and are not meant to be self inclusive:

1. firing an employee,
2. speaking in front of a group of people,
3. long hours,
4. job demands,
5. confrontations,
6. family responsibilities,
7. interruptions,
8. illness,
9. interviewing and hiring employees and
10. equipment breakdowns.

THE EFFECTS OF EXCESSIVE STRESS

All stress is not bad. According to Dr. Paul Rosch, president of the American Institute of Stress, stress can provide needed courage, energy and strength needed to cope with important challenges. He cautioned, however, that if the body's production of stress hormones became excessive, it could cause very serious problems. Dr. Bruce McEwen, head of the neuroendocrinology lab at Rockefeller University, stated that the body could could usually deal with the stress hormones for a short time, but that the prolonged effects could upset the biochemical balances, resulting in an impaired immune system. This left a person open to invasions of cancer cells, dangerous infections, a quickening of the aging process and heart disease.

The evidence is overwhelming. Excessive stress is harmful, and, in many cases, is a direct contributor to death.

THE PRINCIPALSHIP

Many of the situations linked to stress in the workplace are associated with the job of the principal. The following section will describe some research that has identified the nature of managerial work and the principalship.

In 1973 Henry Mintzberg conducted a landmark study of five managers. What made his study significant were both the methodology and the results. The methodology, since referred to as a Mintzberg type methodology, was designed to observe each manager at his worksite for five days, recording each event in the categories designated by the researcher. The results contradicted much of the existing thought at that time on what managers actually did:

1. verbal interaction took up most of the manager's day,
2. brevity, fragmentation and variety described the written and verbal contacts and
3. the hectic pace of activities did not let up during the day.

A number of conclusions about the nature of managerial work were proposed by McCall, et al (1978). They reviewed the available empirical research, defined as observational studies and those which utilized diaries, and offered a number of conclusions, including the following:

1. managers spent most of their days at their worksite,
2. managerial work was characterized by brief contacts and fragmentation; i.e., the need to move rapidly from one topic to another,
3. interruptions were common,
4. managers were not reflective planners; the large number of daily activities and frequent interruptions did not allow for many long periods of uninterrupted planning time and
5. managers consistently did not know how they spent their time.

One of the most comprehensive studies of principals was done in the Chicago Public Schools by Morris, et al (1981). Sixteen principals were shadowed over a three year period utilizing a Mintzberg-type methodology. Each principal was observed for a total of twelve days, and the population sample included a wide distribution of both elementary and secondary principals representing small and large schools from the inner-city and suburbs of the area. In general, findings from previous observational studies were confirmed, and several of the important findings were:

1. instructional leadership, including activities such as classroom observations and teacher supervision, was not a central focus,
2. most of the principals' time was spent in touring the school buildings, engaging in unscheduled, brief, verbal encounters, providing information for staff members and people outside the school, settling disputes and handling unexpected crises as they occurred and

3. the principals' workdays were very busy and highly unpredictable.

Patterson (1985) conducted an ethnographic study of four principals. Findings from previous observational studies were confirmed, such as brevity, variety, fragmentation and a hectic pace, etc. Some additional conclusions, obtained from both his study and a review of the literature, included the following:

1. workdays involved frequent shifts in location,
2. staff members, especially teachers, often sought out the principal in the office and seemingly expected the principal to be immediately available to help with whatever problem was bothering them,
3. the work was often invisible; i.e., a great deal of time and effort by the principal could be devoted to matters and only a small number of staff members might know what was being done,
4. principals often gave much praise to others but rarely received much in return; it was as though the principal was expected to perform well and that it would be taken for granted,
5. the core of most of the activities in the job was communication,
6. principals spent little time in classrooms and
7. principals engaged in an average of about 15 activities each hour of the workday, or about 120 activities each day, and the duration of each activity was about 4 minutes in length.

In summary. the principalship was found to be a highly demanding and varied job which was characterized by the common elements of managerial work; brevity, variety, fragmentation, frequent face-to-face verbal encounters and a large number of daily activities. The work was described as an intensive technology which imposed a great deal of stress on the jobholder.

TECHNIQUES FOR REDUCING STRESS

Stress is a daily part of our lives. We do not live in a perfect world, nor are we ourselves perfect. It is impossible to control everything that happens and every other person. No matter how hard one tries to make daily living stress free, it can not and will not happen. This is especially true for those jobs that contain a great deal of stress, such as the principalship. Bluntly stated, the only way to eliminate stress completely is is to die.

The following sections contain a list of proven techniques for reducing, not eliminating, stress. The list is not inclusive, but rather is a starting point for reducing stress and increasing one's effectiveness and performance:

1. First of all, and most importantly, one must be sincerely willing to attempt to reduce stress. Without the attitude that stress needs to be reduced, no technique has any chance of even modestly succeeding.
2. Time management skills can be very useful. Many educators often dismiss time management as being too businesslike and impersonal, when in reality it is a way of of better managing one's time to help more people. Good time management allows a person to interact with more people during the workday.

   The following list of time management techniques includes a sampling of skills which have been shown to increase effectiveness. Sources from which ideas were used include Douglass and Douglass (1980), Lakein (1973) and Patterson (1985):

   a. Try to touch papers only once.
   b. Delegate as many tasks as possible to other staff members; they will often do a better job than you would have if you have provided proper training and allow adequate time for completion.

c. Don't let an open door policy turn into a revolving door.

d. If possible, seek out others and conduct conversations while standing up; people who are sitting tend to take longer to complete a conversation than when standing up.

e. Schedule regular times to meet with staff members.

f. Utilize dictating equipment for memos and letters.

g. Utilize a tickler file.

h. Always let your secretary know where you will be.

3. A good sense of humor is vital. Being able to laugh with others and to laugh at your own mistakes will work wonders and avoid much stress. Don't take yourself too seriously, and remember that if you aren't willing to laugh at your own mistakes, there are plenty of others who will.

4. A positive attitude is vitally important. You must be willing to accept that mistakes will be made, interruptions will occur, some other people will be difficult to deal with and everyone will not always be satisfied with your decisions. You must do as well as you can, try to improve, be willing to listen to the suggestions and advice advice of others and to accept the responsibility for your decisions. But you must also believe that many more good things occur that bad ones, that most people will support you and that mistakes usually lead to improvement. A negative, cynical mental attitude will greatly increase your stress levels and alienate the people you work and live with.

5. Good health is a very effective method of dealing with stress. Studies have shown that stress can be directly related to any of the following risk factors; being overweight, diabetes, cholesterol, high blood pressure, smoking, abnormal electrocardiagram and lack of activity.

Being in good health will greatly decrease, but not eliminate, your chances of suffering from the effects of stress. Several ways of improving personal health have been suggested and are listed below:

a. What you eat and drink has a direct bearing on your health. Most people eat too much, and weight gain results. Excess weight only increases the probability that stress will adversely affect you.

b. The types of foods eaten are very important. Many of us eat too much fat (red meats, butter, ice cream, fried foods) and not enough whole grains, fruits and vegetables. Fats are higher in calories, lead to weight gain and contribute to other risk factors like high blood pressure and high cholesterol.

c. All exercise is beneficial.

d. Exercise is any activity that increases the heart rate and involves movement. You can exercise by walking, running, riding a bike, swimming, playing tennis, playing racquetball, playing basketball or participating in aerobics. However, you can also exercise by mowing the yard, working around the house, gardening and washing the car. Robert Sweetgall (1987) defines exercise as GOYBASMA; get off your butt and start moving around.

e. Approximately 20 minutes of sustained physical activity is needed for aerobic improvement. To determine your maximum heart rate, first subtract your age from your maximum heart rate of 220. Then multiply this result by 0.6 and 0.8 to obtain your target training zone. For example, a person of 45 should aim for an target heart rate of between 105 and 140 (Kashiwa and Rippe, 1987):

220 - 45 = 175 and 175 x 0.6 and 0.8

f. Adequate rest is necessary.

6. Finally, you need to keep your priorities in order. Denis Waitley, in his book Seeds of Greatness (1983), called this balanced living. He emphasized the need to rate yourself in eight areas of a self dimension grid; community support, mental, social, spiritual, professional, family, financial and physical. Through a careful analysis of the ratings you could easily see if you were placing too much or little emphasis in your life. The key was to set specific and attainable goals in each area, to list specific plans for dealing with the weaknesses and to take action to improve. The setting of specific goals was absolutely necessary; rather than saying you wanted to lose weight, you instead needed to say you wanted to lose 10 pounds by the end of the summer and to specify the means by which the weight would be lost.

SUMMARY

Stress is real, it is a daily occurrence and it is often deadly. There is no way to completely eliminate stress, but several techniques were suggested that have been proven to be successful in reducing stress itself and in overcoming the harmful effects of excessive stress. Ultimately, however, it takes the willingness and personal commitment of the individual to reduce stress, no matter how good the techniques happen to be.

Sometimes it takes a tragic event to convince a person that it is very necessary to change their ways and get their priorities in order. For example, a few years ago my three year old daughter woke up early one Sunday morning. I got up, turned on the television for her, then went back to sleep. The next thing I knew, I was lying in the hospital surrounded by doctors and my wife. After going back to sleep I had two seizures at home and had to be transported to the hospital. The diagnosis was terrifying; I had a malignant brain tumor and immediate surgery and intensive radiation therapy was required.

The tumor is now gone and I have, as a result of that experience, completely changed my outlook on life. It took a life altering event, however, to convince me to make the necessary adjustments in my priorities.

That young man is me, and I am completely convinced that the cancerous brain tumor resulted from too many years of self imposed excessive stress. I feel very blessed to have been cured through first rate medical treatment and, I'm also convinced, divine intervention. I don't want anyone else to have to experience having a brain tumor to make them change their lives. Hopefully, the techniques offered in this paper will be helpful, and I plead with you not to put yourself and your loved ones through the living hell that my family experienced because of my lack of good judgement. Don't make the same mistakes that I did.

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